

We certainly knew that an underground of 1,000 armed men was practically immobile if it were attacked only by local or regional popular forces. But experience had demonstrated that they could not withstand an attack of a Viet Minh division. Therefore they had to be multiplied, and spread over a very large area to force the Viets to disperse their efforts. It was also necessary to study the means of supporting them by regular troops in case of serious difficulties, something which had not yet been envisaged.

Therefore we wanted to transform the entire zone situated between the Black River in the west and the Red River and the Claire River in the east into an underground zone. We could envisage the reconquest of all of the High Region from this enormous base.

The underground of the Chocolat zone (Cho Quang Lo) had to be restored to action with Zim, its former radio operator who had managed to reach Hanoi.

An underground had to be created in the Luc an Chau region with Lt. Luong.

The Pavot underground, which we had had to abort because of a lack of resources in the Dong Van region, would be reestablished on a new base with Lt. Seco Thin.

This group of undergrounds was to constitute a veritable second front in the rear of the Viet Minh and would have largely facilitated the operations envisaged in autumn 1954.

We had also anticipated, if this first phase were realized, equipping the Tho peoples between Cao Bang and Lang Son as an underground.

In Laos all of the Meo peoples were to be equipped as an underground. Favorable contacts had been established in these zones as a whole. A detailed program had been studied, and its execution was to begin in spring, with strict application of the directives given in the instructions on the Indochina Undergrounds.

This considerable work required long preparation; it had been envisaged for autumn 1954. All of the eminent people in these regions who had taken refuge in Hanoi were registered, recruited and trained, and received very specific missions in a fixed region.

Special Missions were regularly parachuted: 46 on 28 April, 4 on 5 May, and 5 on 16 June.

They were very well received everywhere.

They allowed regular radio communication to be established along with the implementation of the infrastructure of the underground sectors. They regularly sent by ground routes young people to be trained in our training centers. A center for 400 underground fighters was to be created in Hadong, Tonkin, and another for 150 in Laos. Tourane on the coast and Ban Me Thuot in the mountainous plateaus were given analogous centers.

Feeding and supporting the undergrounds required 1,500 Dakota hours per month in March 1954. They had necessitated the creation of a Bureau of Air Services and of Air Operations Sections in every Regional Representation.

As a matter of fact the logistic support of the undergrounds had to be made punctually, under the penalty of seeing our partisans become inactive. Guerrilla warfare and mobility made it impossible for them to set up important depots, vulnerable objectives for the enemy. This removed them from the rice paddies, where they could not feed themselves except by pressuring the inhabitants. On the other hand, we had to feed our guerrilla warriors in poor regions by bringing them rations. Still, this was our best trump in the propaganda against the Viet Minh who nourished their troops off the countryside. Made punctually the parachute drops permitted simple tactics, reacting to enemy maneuvers and using flexibility to counter too heavy a pressure, to harass the lines of communication and to threaten their depots.

In addition to the considerable morale which they contributed to the underground fighters, the Air Force were the only ones who could give them serious fire support in critical situations.

Furthermore, our teams often discovered objectives which they could neither attack nor destroy. All of these objectives were designated for the Air Force, and our teams generally assured remarkable guidance for them.

About 300 to 400 hours of B-26 activity were used monthly by the GMI.

The underground fighters particularly represented a mass of poorly trained people, despite all the efforts which we had made in this direction. In no case could they be compared to regular troops. They were incomparable in defending their village, their home or their corner of a valley. But they were lacking a shock element capable of mounting fruitful ambushes and of establishing local resistance if it proved necessary. Lacking a specialized parachute battalion, which could not always be obtained, each Regional Representation was provided with a training camp where the most active elements in the underground were assembled and trained to form guerrilla support groups intended to be parachuted to a point of interest. Thus, when the decision was made on 11 July 1954 to equip the underground fighters on the left bank of the Red River, two commandos of 80 men were parachuted to put a stop to the local resistance of Viet elements.

At this point, and with the constant support contributed by General Navarre, the GMI had become a very important agency. As we have seen, it was made up of two distinct elements: a troop corps and a special service.

The troop corps had the administrative services of a regiment available. It consisted of 6 higher officers, 74 junior officers, and 3 native officers serving as French officers, or a total of 83 officers.

--214 European noncommissioned officers and 61 native noncommissioned officer officers, for a total of 275 noncommissioned officers;

--163 European troops and 250 native troops.

The special service had special credits, materiel and personnel.

Credits: the funds necessary for the maintenance, clothing and pay of the irregular personnel, made almost completely by the Commander-in-Chief (about 6,000,000 piastres per month). For its part the SDECE provided 200,000 piastres.

Personnel: the personnel, 15,000 to 20,000 partisans at this time, were distributed in the training centers, the training camps and the undergrounds, the organization, recruiting and support, and pay of which varied from one region to another; they formed the GMI maneuvering mass.

Materiel: almost all of the materiel, armament, radio sets, vehicles, etc. were provided by the Army. One small part, a few radios, came from SDECE.

To assure the expansion of the undergrounds, significant armament (15,000 items) and radio sets had been offered to the GMI by the Americans, who promised to furnish more if it were necessary. As a counterpart two American officers were permanently detached to the GMI General Staff.

They had replaced Major Beglow. I had the clear impression that he had proven himself to be very sincere and very cooperative with the French. This was undoubtedly the reason for his departure. He was replaced by two younger officers with French names, which could look sympathetic. But this was simply to mislead. They were with us to spy on us, to such an extent that I had to forbid my officers to speak with them on matters of service, and authorizing only Captain Duvivier, in my absence, to do so, a man who had followed me in all of my transfers. However, as agreed, I kept them up-to-date on the evolution and implantation of our undergrounds.

In December 1953 an important CIA delegate came to Saigon. On the request of the SDECE Colonel, I gave him a complete exposé of the GMI situation and of our plans. In March 1954 I had to give the same exposé to another CIA member

under the same conditions. I believe that my arguments, our plans and the way in which we realized them succeeded in convincing them, because they promised to give us all the armament and radio sets necessary, and they kept their word.

Above I have given the reasons why our underground fighters were far from Dien Bien Phu. But I often went there, and sometimes in the company of General Navarre. Actually this was the point closest to some undergrounds. The wounded were evacuated from Dien Bien Phu and eventually I was able to go there. In February General Navarre went from there to Morane, accompanied by Major Fournier, to inspect one of the undergrounds in the Cardamone zone.

I was struck by the depth of some barbed wire entanglements which shone in the sun and appeared to be impenetrable, as well as by the weak protection provided by some automatic weapons which flanked them.

One matter above all bothered me, the absence of a large jumping zone. The year before at the time of Na San, I had been in charge of the preparation of airborne operations. General Gilles had requested a battalion to parachute. It was impossible to satisfy him. Actually the barbed wire was stretched to the very edge of the airstrip for the defense of the camp. For this reason the jumping zone, which should be at least 200 meters wide, was reduced to about 40 meters, making it impossible to parachute. Therefore the battalion had to be put down several days later by airplane.

Now, at Dien Bien Phu, I found that the same error was going to be repeated. In the plans I could not see any signs of the large jumping zone necessary for an air-land base.

In January I had accompanied General Navarre to Dien Bien Phu, where General Gilles also was. Although the anger which he nourished with respect to me had not diminished, I intended to inform him of my concern. But he simply and absolutely refused to listen to me. I did not insist.

There was no jumping zone inside the entrenched camp, although it would have been easy to establish one more than a kilometer wide and 2 to 3 kilometers long, very easy to mark even at night, and on which parachute jumps would have been greatly facilitated in all kinds of weather.

General Navarre tells us in his book: "As is the rule in such cases, Dien Bien Phu had been conceived as a function of a 'future enemy', the probable power of which was calculated by overestimating to the extent which seemed reasonable from what we knew of the 'current enemy', i.e., the Viet Minh of November 1953. When a ten-ton bridge was constructed, a security margin ranging up to 15 or 20 tons was anticipated, but not up to 100 or 150 tons. This is what we had done. If the enemy strength had only been increased once or twice, we would have absorbed the shock, because our arrangements were ready for it. But they had been increased by a much higher coefficient in a number of areas: transportation capacity, communication repairs, artillery power and DCA (expansion unknown) strength. This is the area where the surprise was most serious."

General Navarre adds, "If these events took place and if our expectations were overturned, it is because the government became involved in the fatal gears of the Geneva Conference without taking council with the Command. The thoughtless decision of holding this Conference, made at the moment when our fate was in the balance and could no longer be modified, completely changed the data of the problem."

From the end of December the girls installed by Captain Borcard on RP 41 had informed us of the movement of trucks carrying powerful artillery. From then on many convoys rolled toward Dien Bien Phu night after night.

While these preparations aroused anxiety at the echelon of the Commander-in-Chief, the Dien Bien Phu garrison, assured of its strength, waited impatiently for the assault which was not to be long delayed. It occurred on 13 March at 5:15 p.m., and was to last until 17 May.

In the afternoon of 14 March we learned that the "Beatrice" support point had fallen during the night and that an immediate counterattack to retake it was impossible because of a lack of sufficient reserves. We realized that the fate of the entrenched camp was going to be sealed.

I shall not speak of the battle of Dien Bien Phu in itself. Others have done so. I shall only mention two books: one by my comrade, Colonel Langlais, who was the soul and brain of the defense: "Dien Bien Phu", and one by my friend Bernard Fall: "Dien Bien Phu, un coin d'enfer" (Dien Bien Phu, a corner of hell). From these books I have retained the latter. I knew, as did all of my comrades, that the Dien Bien Phu garrison had been beaten thoroughly. But the combatants were of a rare modesty. I had to read the book by Bernard Fall,¹ who studied the battle in both camps, in order to understand with what heroism, with what combat knowledge Bigeard, an extraordinary tactician, de Seguin Pazzis, Touret and Botella, going on the assault with their battalion of Vietnamese paratroopers singing the Marseillaise, and so many others impossible to mention, because the list would be too long, who died or who have come back, all holding on to their positions, vigorously counterattacked when they were lost, without despairing of victory to the very last day.

Bernard Fall stresses that the losses inflicted on the enemy were such that the Viet Minh were almost ready to renounce their offensive and, as the previous year at Na San, to retreat to lick their wounds.

From this time on all of the thoughts of the Army in Indochina turned to Dien Bien Phu, to our comrades. We all had the problem of wondering how to help them win, as at Na San the previous year, or to get them out of the tricky situation they were in, if victory proved to be impossible.

¹ Killed in Indochina in 1963.

Like all the services, the GMI was put on the spot and invited to use all of its resources to facilitate the mission of the defenders.

The Laos undergrounds, south of Phong Saly, were thrust very close to the Tonkin border. The Cardamone underground blockaded the Lao Kay post, as we have already said. They also constantly harassed RP 41. To protect this road, needed to supply Dien Bien Phu, the Viets had to permanently utilize 14 battalions, seven of which belonged to the regular units.

The GMI proved to be such an annoyance to the Viets that they mounted a strong operation to recapture the Than Uyen Dakota airstrip. The underground fighters had to evacuate it in April 1954. However, they had maintained themselves there for more than four months with their own resources.

Several times General Navarre asked me what the undergrounds of the Tra Ning plateau and those from the San Neua region could do for Dien Bien Phu. The former were 200 kilometers, as the crow flies, and the latter 150 kilometers away, distances which had to be multiplied approximately by two because of the terrain configuration.

The underground fighters were above all men attached to their own country and cognizant only of it, with a summary military organization, itself adapted to local living conditions. Therefore it did not seem possible for us to move about 4,000 men such a long distance and over such difficult terrain.

In addition this move posed problems difficult to solve, both from the organizational viewpoint and from the supply viewpoint; in addition the Air Force was more and more occupied in supplying Dien Bien Phu.

However, one Sunday in the middle of April, Captain Duvivier, who knew the GMI, its problems and its capabilities perfectly, came to me early in the afternoon and substantially said to me:

"We have answered General Navarre that we cannot move our underground fighters; basically we do not know anything about this, since we haven't tried it.

"Certainly the Meos will not move for the sole purpose of saving our comrades. But perhaps if we give each of them a silver bar, the only money which they recognize, they will agree."

"Basically," I answered Duvivier, "Why not?" Since we have to try anything, it must be done."

I immediately telephoned the personal residence of General Navarre and said to him:

"General, one of my officers has just made me a proposition which may be of interest; may I come see you?"

"I'm waiting for you," he said to me.

Ten minutes later I was at the General's home and asked him if he had a number of silver bars sufficient for the Meos.

"We have as many as you want," he said to me.

I outlined to him a plan which I had just developed in the automobile on the way to his home:

"I propose to transfer 3,000 to 4,000 underground fighters on the Tra Ning plateau. I am going to assemble staffs available to the CMI to give them minimum command and distribute suitable equipment to them. Then we shall set out in the direction of Dien Bien Phu in stages of about 30 kilometers, and as far as Muong Son.

"At every stage it will be necessary for the supplies for this column to be assured by parachute drops, the evening of arrival.

"The Sam Neua underground fighters, the Servan underground under the orders of Lt. Brichier, will also march in the direction of Muong Son, which is approximately halfway to Dien Bien Phu for them.

"Then, we shall continue and approach the entrenched camp. We shall occupy the largest zone possible south and very close to it.

"At this moment you would have to put a battalion of paratroopers at my disposal to welcome the Dien Bien Phu soldiers if they try a sortie in this direction.

"The ground is very rough, and if they leave the encirclement they will be safe. They cannot be pursued."

General Navarre immediately agreed.

The next morning, taking with me my Chief-of-Staff, Major Bonnigal, and Captain Duvivier, I took the airplane and went to Xieng Kouang. Mr. Touby and Captain Sassi, in charge of all of the Tra Ning undergrounds, were waiting for us.

I immediately informed Mr. Touby of the plan which I had proposed to General Navarre, and his promise to give each Meo who participated in the expedition a silver bar.

Mr. Touby answered me simply:

"We do not need the silver bars. We will do everything you ask us. All of the Meos are with you."

I had already tested the loyalty of the Meos. However, I was surprised at how loyal Touby and all of his Meos were to us.

Sassi had not waited for my arrival to prepare for this operation. For a week all of the underground fighters under his command had been on alert. He had anticipated that two-thirds of the men from each of the undergrounds should be prepared for movement, while the rest stayed where they were to ward off any Viet Minh attack on the territory. Outside of the zones held by the underground, the Viets actually had very active elements everywhere.

Together we studied a plan to assemble and put this group of underground fighters on the way.

The underground fighters of the Servan zone (Sam Neun) with Brehier had to march east-west in the direction of Muong Song. He would take his three underground leaders with him, Sergeant-Major Verniere of the Nong Kheng underground, Sergeant-Major Chevillot of the Houei Thab underground, and Sergeant-Major Fritsch of the Pathi underground.

Fritsch, the closest to Muong Son and the first to arrive, was to prepare, as well as he could, for the assembly of the entire column, which included no less than 3,000 men.

The underground fighters of the Malo zone, under the orders of Lt. Nesnier, and his complete intervention group were also to set out as early as possible in the direction of Muang Son.

He took with him the leaders of his different underground groups, Sergeant-Majors Lasserre, Magent and Orsini.

The Tra Ning plateau undergrounds would march on the direct orders of Captain Sassi. He would take with him the Kheng Khay training commandos with warrant officers Meyer and Deckeur, Sergeant Kheliff and Leblond, and the intervention commando of Sergeant-Major Legeux and Sergeant Marcellin.

Lt. Van Pao, who commanded the underground in the Nong Met region at the border of Annam and Laos, would first set out in the direction of Xieng Khouang with his intervention commando and his three underground leaders, Sergeants Paris (underground north of Nam Mo), Guellec (Thalinoi underground) and Senard (Pa Pong underground).

They would constitute the rear guard of the column. I gave them a rapid inspection when they passed Xieng Khouang and completed the armament and ammunition of certain undergrounds.

Certainly their equipment was somewhat irregular, but their weapons were excellent and they knew how to use them.

I was struck by the uniform of the Van Pao Commando. I had not seen it since it left the training phase at Cape Saint-Jacques. He had an extraordinary radiance, a first-class leader.¹

A permanent command post was established at Khan Khay with Captain Travaux and Sergeants Vilo and Eneny. I also took up position there with Major Bonnigal and Captain Duvivier, especially to assure parachute supplies for the various elements of this column, stretched out over an immense territory. Thus, all along the route, they punctually received rations, munitions and the other supplies which they needed.

I had decided to take personal command of the column when it assembled at Muong Son, taking with me Major Bonnigal and Captain Duvivier. Certainly we could have jumped by parachute at that time. But I knew from experience that in this "poorly paved" area, an accident on the ground was always possible. I had no desire for any member of my staff, or me, to be handicapped at the time that we would need all of our resources.

I received assurance from General Navarre that a helicopter would be at my disposal for this purpose when desired. Then we had anticipated that the entire column would set off for Dien Bien Phu by various routes in order to cover the widest possible zone.

At my request the parachute battalion, kept in reserve, would be dropped for me at the point judged to be most favorable.

On 7 May Sassi had assembled the entire column at Muong Son under good conditions. Everything had gone very well. Everyone's morale was excellent.

During the afternoon I went down to Saigon to finalize the dropping of the parachute battalion with the EMIFT. That was where I learned that the Dien Bien Phu garrison had finally given up.

¹ He was later appointed General by the Americans.

It was only on 9 May that Samsi learned of the fall of Dien Bien Phu by a message transmitted from the Khan Khay base. The underground fighters remained on the spot for several days. Then I gave them the order to return to their underground zones. It really seemed that the Viets were going to march on Laos after their victory. This would be a measure of security while waiting for the results of the events.

Nothing had succeeded in this matter. The failure of the last attempt to help the defenders was largely my fault; however, I had confidence in the Meo undergrounds and I knew how they had forced the evacuation of Na San the year before, and how they had bitterly resisted for a month before yielding to the repeated assaults of the 316th Viet Division. But they had fought on their ground, where they were at home, near the villages and homes. Their combat had a meaning for them. It seemed impossible to me to involve them 300 kilometers away against an enemy whom they knew to be formidable.

Now, we could have left two weeks earlier. In this particularly difficult region, we were invulnerable to the enemy divisions which would not have been able to pursue us, because there were no roads and because we had the enormous advantage over them of being able to be supplied by parachute.

My only satisfaction came from the Meos, these rough and courageous men who had replied to our appeal without asking for anything.

The Committee of Liberation of the Upper Red River

The fall of Dien Bien Phu, no matter how bitterly felt by all of our comrades, had not slowed the GMI activity and our plan of expanding the undergrounds. Certainly we had lost a harsh battle, but the losses suffered by the enemy were such that for several months he would be unable to conduct an offensive on the same scale.

Contacts established in the region between the Red River and the Claire River were always excellent and developed according to anticipation. The major phase was anticipated for the beginning of July: the implementation of the largest underground ever created, extending from Hagiang, Hoang Su Phi, Pa Kha and Lao Kay to the north, from the Red River and the Claire River to the west and east, and from Luc An Chau to the south.

While the Laos underground had always required a European command staff to obtain effectiveness, the Tonkin underground fighters had a valuable native command staff capable of training, directing and commanding recruits in the field. On the other hand, they had acquired a great deal of independence, which had to be considered.

Actually this situation was only the logical result of the constant policy of the GCMA-GMI since its creation.

In August 1952, commanding the North Vietnam Regional Representation after our first favorable contacts in the High Region, I had given instructions, the essence of which was:

To succeed we must create a resistance organization based on political action undertaken on a large scale with the collaboration and support of French and Vietnamese military and civilian authorities. We shall win these people to our cause by assuring those who take an active part in the resistance movement of pay in

proportion to their risks¹ and deserts.

Beginning with these elements (leaders loved or feared, the point of departure of our activity), it is necessary to create a resistance organization in Hanoi suited for each region to be liberated.

"This action in its first phase will have a particularly political nature aimed at disintegrating the military potential of the Viet Minh in the High Region."

In December 1953, as the GMI commander at the time that our activity was taking a favorable turn and it appeared necessary to push it to the limit, I had specified in a new directive:

"A purely military action is insufficient; it can only succeed if it is accompanied by political action involving all of the people of the Thai Federation.

"Now, the mass of the Thai people is favorable to us, and the ethnic minorities either are or can be, if we know how to adopt our policy to their needs and their aspirations.

"This political-military action can be undertaken and conducted successfully by the GCMA if the current military resources are given to it."

I pointed out the decadence of the Thai feudal lords descending from Deo Van Tri. While their leader, Deo Van Long, was of a certain class and authority, his sons and the majority of his relatives were worn out men, without qualities, unpopular and thinking only of enjoying the privileges attributed to their functions. They could no longer be counted on. The decadence of this family had been rapid; in three generations it had come to what could correspond in France to the period of the do-nothing kings.

¹ In writing this I was thinking of TVE, a Viet captain whom I had contacted in the south in 1948 and who did not come to our side because the careers we proposed to him did not seem to be enough.

From this I concluded that it was necessary to establish new men, the best ones and the most efficient of those who fought to liberate their country from the Viet occupation. I asked that a return of the regions liberated by the underground fighters to civilian administration be seriously studied and that, before its implementation, preliminary consultation be held with the people, in particular the underground fighters, those who shaped the liberation of their country.

I recommended the creation of a new generation of Mandarins born in the resistance. I gave temporary instructions for the native underground leaders to be consulted for the restoration of the administration as long as the undergrounds remained war zones.

The preceding is only a brief resume of the instructions given to the Regional Representation leader to defend a policy which had received the written or tacit approval of all of the authorities on which the GMI depended.

The oral instructions given by me to the underground leaders during my instructions were even more specific and significant. I often repeated to them, "I have given you a rifle, this rifle is yours, it is your property. If sometimes someone comes to ask you to give it up, do not give it up, and even if I should come to ask for it, it is yours; it has been given to you, and I would not have the right to take it away from you."

I said to the outstanding leaders, "The Deos acquired their power by weapons. Weapons, you have them; whoever conquers a village will be the leader of the village, and whoever conquers a province, will be the leader of the province. Your future is in the weapons which have been given to you."

Certainly in doing this I exceeded the directives which had been given to me, but it is well known that flies are not attracted by vinegar. If, in Algeria, we had left the Harkis their weapons, they would not have allowed themselves to be slaughtered like defenseless lambs.

This policy aimed at taking control of all of the High Region from the Viet Minh, a region which they absolutely had to control, because it served them as a retreat base in case of defeat. All of its means of communication with China passed through it. But such a policy could not succeed without the total approval of the people and of the local leaders, to whom it was necessary to give the greatest possible initiative and great independence. Obviously it required time.

Certainly it far exceeded the directives originally given to the GCMA by the Action Service leader in Paris. It frightened the latter in its magnitude.

Taking a stand on the directives and the constant policy of the GMI in this domain, Major Fournier, the Commander of the North Vietnam Regional Representation, came to find me by air on 25 April, when I was at Xieng Kouang with officers from the Laos and Touby undergrounds, busy combining the underground fighters and starting them off in the direction of Dien Bien Phu.

The situation in Dien Bien Phu was critical. At that time there was no more doubt that we had lost the battle and that the principal concern of the Command was to do everything possible to recover the maximum number of personnel from the entrenched camp. Therefore the consequences could be very serious for the future of the undergrounds and of the regions they had liberated or were going to liberate.

Fournier had thought of creating a Committee of Liberation of the Upper Red River, which would have given an official status to the liberated regions. He hastily submitted the general features of his plan to me. In view of the situation of the moment and the mission to Dien Bien Phu, I did not have the time to study this question thoroughly. But I had known Fournier for a long time. I knew the way in which he had led the underground at Tonkin. I had confidence in him.

I simply said to him, "Go ahead! You have my entire approval. I shall examine this plan more attentively when I return from the expedition which I am about to start. I do not know when I will be back in Saigon."

Fournier left me and began his work.

When I bent over the mass of papers waiting for me the morning of 9 May, I first noted the ones from Fournier. He had not been idle.

I first found the report of the charter meeting of the Committee of Liberation of the Upper Red River, which was worded thus:

"On 15 April 1954 at hanoi a CLNFR (Committee of Liberation of the Upper Red River) was set up after deliberation by the native military authorities and prominent people who are currently participating in the struggle against the Viet Minh, either by giving the underground the weight of their traditional influence and their presence, or by collaborating in the common action of freeing the territory."

"The Committee presented itself to the battalion leader Fournier, the Commander of the GMI Tonking, who officially accepted it; this organization puts into a concrete form the structure established by the GMI Tonkin since February 1953 by applying the directives received."

This report was accompanied by an explanatory note, of which I now give the essence:

"Within the framework of our 'activity in the undergrounds', an administrative and military organization has been established in the regions of the Upper Red River.

"This organization has come into being by the spontaneous creation of a Committee of Liberation, the first meeting of which is detailed in the attached report.

"This committee is only the realization of a state of fact devolving from the military infrastructure established by our care, and corresponds to a concern for territorial organization depending on the military authority. It thus creates a moral entity which could be the origin of a popular mass movement, the aggregate instinct of which demands more than ever dynamic leaders sharing in the risks of battle.

"It is certain that this organization can present dangers on the political plane if the worth of its members is considered, all of whom have taken up arms against the Viets. It must also be said that, without them, nothing effective could have been done, and that the principle of authority forged in this way, even if it were done by force, is no less the social structure of a reconquest of hearts, so dear to the partisans of pacification.

"The evolution of a Committee of Resistance of this type can finally only facilitate territorial reorganization, both military and civilian at the same time, since it already utilizes the people eminent in operational command.

"Beginning with the postulate that the Committee is the solution of the moment, it appears desirable to propose, if the command acknowledges its existence:

- "1. That the chairmanship of it be given to the Commander-in-Chief,
- "2. That a sum of social funds, maintained by us at least in the beginning and handled by them, be created to facilitate the return to a normal life in the undergrounds.

"This formula could be later extended to other regions, if the Command gave its agreement as soon as the undergrounds had reached the maturity of those of the Upper Red River."

These official papers, which Fournier and I considered very important, were accompanied, as happens very often, by a personal letter to explain the basis of the matter perfectly to me.

Here is the essence of it:

"As you could expect, I composed the report of creation before asking Mung to form the Committee himself. It was simpler, and everyone was completely in agreement. My purpose is to give them the feeling that the mass of the people is at least a moral person. That will certainly help us, and the chairmanship of the General-in-Chief would be a large step forward for us.

"A second objective is to see everyone participate officially in the action, and thus to detect those who do not want to compromise themselves.

"My third objective is to record on paper the reciprocal agreements which have only been verbal agreements up to now.

"If you have my papers ratified, we shall demonstrate the same thing for Cao Bac Lang and Phong Saly without difficulty. The quota of public funds which I anticipate assures us of new opportunities, because the underground, seeing it handled by the Committee, will contribute all of the resources from the booty of war and local resources to it.

"Finally, Romain-Desfosses¹ came to see me twice. The second time was to tell me that he had asked to replace you if you were not kept. He should write to you on this subject. He saw Morlanc at Paris and knows his opinions on your deviationism."

This last remark did nothing but confirm what Paris thought of the activities we were conducting. Therefore I was assured that it would not look kindly on the decision we had just made. However, in the situation of the moment after the jolt in morale produced in our friends and ourselves by the fall of Dien Bien Phu, it was the only decision permitting our undergrounds to be saved by giving them, if necessary, the maximum of resources for them to defend themselves.

But it is also a constant tradition in the Army to shelf a leader who has just suffered a defeat as significant as the Dien Bien Phu defeat. Despite the assurances which had been given to General Navarre, there was no doubt that he would be replaced within a short time.

Finally, during the delicate period which he had to face, the problems posed by the maintenance of our undergrounds were certainly not going to be the first

¹ Colonel Romain-Desfosses, contacted later, would certainly have continued the same policy. (Translator's note: Romain(s) is spelled these two ways in the original text).

priority of his preoccupation. Therefore there was no question of lying dormant but, on the contrary, of rapidly seizing all the opportunities which could be favorable for our activity.

On 18 May, as a matter of fact, General Ely, the head of the General Staff of the Army, arrived in Indochina on a mission for the government. This could be nothing but a sign preceding the departure of General Navarre. Ely remained in Indochina until 23 May.

I first informed Col. Fleurant verbally of our projects. He had always defended my plans to General Navarre, and had constantly given me his support. He unreservedly approved the plan I submitted to him.

But the report which I had to prepare on this subject necessarily had to pass by the SDECE Colonel Delegate. In this moving epic of interregnum, he was actually the only stable authority. He had survived in Indochina through all of the changes in civil and military command because he avoided taking the least personal initiative, strictly applying the directives which came to him from Paris. Therefore he always had above him a large umbrella which sheltered him from all storms.

I composed my report with the greatest degree of precaution. Here is the essence of it:

"1. The battalion chief commanding the North Vietnam Regional Representation has just forwarded to me the report of the first meeting of the Committee of Liberation of the Upper Red River (CLHFR), which has just been created.

"2. The report on GMI activity in the fourth quarter, based on the recent evolution of the mountain minorities, the current events of which have considerably broadened their horizons, in particular concerning young and active people, requested:

"That the policy to be conducted with respect to them be democratic, and that it free them from the old mandarin guardianships which no longer correspond to their aspirations."

Finding that: "The just due of the ambitions founded on real value and on services rendered has always been a powerful incentive for action in critical periods."

It is requested that: "Important command posts be given to those who prove to be the best, no matter what their origins."

"This evolution was embodied on 15 April by the creation at Hanoi of the CLMFR, which unites the most important persons recruited by the GMI for the creation, development and expansion of the underground in the High Region of the Red River.

"The Committee had been in power for a long time. The meeting of 15 April had no purpose except to give it official blessing.

"This Committee follows the line of the policy followed by GMI, which attempts to give greater and greater responsibility to the natives of value in the conduct of the guerrilla war, while keeping them strictly under our authority.

"Therefore I have the honor of requesting that this Committee be officially created by a decision of the Commanding General-in-Chief or the High Commissioner, in order to give it increased authority.

"Others can be created later for the Lang Son region, for example , and for the Red Thai zone.

"3. I propose that this decision be worded as follows:

"The General-in-Chief (or the High Commissioner) approves the creation of the CLMFR, constituted at Hanoi on 15 April, grouping the native military authorities and eminent people currently participating in the struggle against the Viet Minh, either by conducting guerrilla operations or by contributing the traditional influence of their presence to the underground fighters, and collaborating in the joint activity of liberating their region.

"The Committee has the following constitution:"

The response, which I somewhat expected, reached me on 21 May. Here are the principal paragraphs of it:

"The question of the creation of a CLNFR should have been submitted, before any step in execution was taken, to the Committee of Orientation of Action, and made the subject of special correspondence; only the high authorities in Indo-china are actually qualified to make decisions of this nature, which can have serious consequences on the French-Vietnamese policy and on the international plane. A recall to the severe order must be addressed on this subject through you to the Commander of the North Vietnam Regional Representation. A sanction will be taken against him and under the same conditions, with the reason being:

"Has taken initiatives on the political order without any emergency nature, without authorization from higher authorities."

"You yourself and your representatives in the Regional Representations are not to take any initiatives in areas where there can be political consequences. It is up to you to make proposals which should be addressed through the chain of command to be studied by the Committee of Orientation of Action, the Commission of Orientation of Action if this is necessary, in order to be presented to the General and to the General Commissioner

"Although you were summoned to the Commission of Orientation of Action meeting on the afternoon of 20 May, in the morning of 20 May you sent an urgent telegram to the Commander of the North Vietnam Regional Representation to consider establishing among the Red Thais a Committee of the same type which has just been created for the Upper Red River.

"All this shows that the GMI is conducting and carrying out a "policy" despite instructions from higher authorities. As a result and as a warning, I am establishing a record of punishment concerning you, for the same reason as that established for the Commander of the North Vietnam Regional Representation."

The punishment report concerning me was attached.

In reading this report I had the very clear impression that the Colonel Delegate had not learned that we had lost the battle of Dien Bien Phu, that he did not realize the important consequences which would soon follow, that the Commanding General-in-Chief was going to be changed, that his successors would come with a new General-Staff, and that the latter would take a long time to understand our problems and produce a solution for them. Therefore there was no time to lose.

I have known quite a number of officers who have passed through the midst of important events with an umbrella as their essential weapon. They have never gotten wet, have never even been splashed, and have finally had a brilliant career in the shadow.

The system in force, consisting of punishing an officer like a little boy who has to stand in the corner in grammar school, has always seemed stupid to me. Therefore there was no question of my inflicting this punishment on my comrade Fournier, who had only applied the directives I had given him. I never even spoke to him about them.

As far as mine was concerned, the rule demands that an officer who is punished sign the punishment record inflicted on him, so that he knows the reason for it, and that he return the report to the authority which issued it. I purely and simply decided to keep it and to wait for it to be demanded from me. It never was. This is why it is still in my files.

Therefore I asked Colonel Fleurant to assemble the Commission of Orientation of Action as quickly as possible. Its purpose was to examine solutions to be considered concerning the future of the underground fighters in view of the current situation.

The essential question was obviously the fate of the underground fighters. These were men who had fought at our sides to preserve their ancestral liberty and to escape being handed over to the Annamese, whom they had always detested and

whom they hated even more since they were communists.

Our purpose was to extend as far as possible the regions which they controlled and to establish this by the Geneva Conference, so that these people could remain free in their own homes, if necessary with our support and our protection.

This is what I explained to the Commission.

But most of its members were ignorant of all of our problems. They only knew that with the predicted change in command, their role in Indochina was going to be terminated.

Backed up by Colonel Fleurant, I was able to achieve that the underground fighters would have the ability to continue their activity with the same intensity as formerly, while adapting themselves to the new military situation created by Dien Bien Phu. For me, this was an essential point.

I then asked that our underground zones be recognized at Geneva, that they be clearly defined and delimited in order to be removed from Viet Minh activity and preserve some independence.

For this purpose I had asked Fournier to form within the undergrounds regular units with complete equipment and armament which could be presented to any control commission. This measure was well under way. Fournier had anticipated and practically established five regiments.

But I was not followed on this second point. The Commission decided that:

"In case the Geneva conversations should end with a cease-fire, the underground fighters should, if they did not continue their activity, at least quietly constitute a potential force which could be utilized if needed."

"a) The Commission is consequently opposed to any declaration in the current negotiations of the existence of the undergrounds to argue for demilitarized zones. Actually, if such zones were established, there would be the risk of installation of composite commissions responsible for checking on the disarmament of the troops,

whether they were regular or not.

"b) The Commission therefore believes it is preferable, after informing the native chiefs, to evacuate the French staffs, to officially deny any French participation in the organization of the undergrounds, and to maintain with them only clandestine communication.

"c) The Commission requests that the French Delegation at Geneva be apprised of this position and that, in particular, it makes no statement of the demilitarized zones based on the existence of the undergrounds, a study of which seems to have been made already."

The idea was to preserve the undergrounds in a clandestine way; the idea of transforming the underground fighters into regular troops was abandoned; at a later date this decision would lead to disarming them, which would incidentally be difficult or even impossible, given the independent nature of these political-military organizations.

The decision of the Commission was a prelude to abandoning the peoples who had placed their confidence in France.

However, this is the same policy which was applied by the Paris Accords in 1973. They recognized the independence of the zones not controlled by the Saigon government. With the same arguments we would have been able to obtain the independence of the mountainous regions which the Viet Minh did not control.

However, the Commission gave its approval to the transitional measures taken by the GMI Commander while waiting for later dormancy on the part of the sabotaged undergrounds:

1. Food and stocking of weapons, ammunition and rice.
2. Measures appropriate to assure the maintenance of radio communications.

Finally, having been informed of the creation of the Political Committee for the Liberation of the Upper Red River, the Commission gave its approval to this